

**THE CALIFORNIA ENERGY CRISIS**

# Water Officials Warn of Possible 80% Cutbacks

■ **Dry year:** The Sierra snowpack is half of what's desirable, though no one is willing to cry 'drought.'

By JOHN JOHNSON  
TIMES STAFF WRITER

State water officials are warning of dramatic cuts—perhaps 80%—in deliveries to farms and urban centers this year, though nobody is yet using the dreaded word “drought” to characterize what authorities call a “critically dry year.”

The Sierra snowpack is “about half where we’d like it,” said one official after measuring it Friday. Even though there are three months left in the rainy season, experts say it is unlikely that normal rainfall levels will be reached.

“Meteorologists indicate to us there is a one in 10 possibility of a normal winter,” said Jeff Cohen of the state Department of Water Resources.

If the water supply doesn’t grow, cuts in state water supplies to some regions could be as severe as, or even exceed, those imposed during the last drought.

If water shortages do occur, they will exacerbate the state’s energy

visiting the Echo Summit measuring station.

Having weathered a severe drought less than a decade ago, California is better prepared to deal with water supply problems than it was the electricity shortage. After the drought of 1987-92, agencies around the state implemented a broad range of conservation and storage strategies.

From low-flush toilets to ground water “banking,” or storage, and new reservoirs, “We have many more tools at our disposal,” said Bob Muir, a spokesman for the MWD.

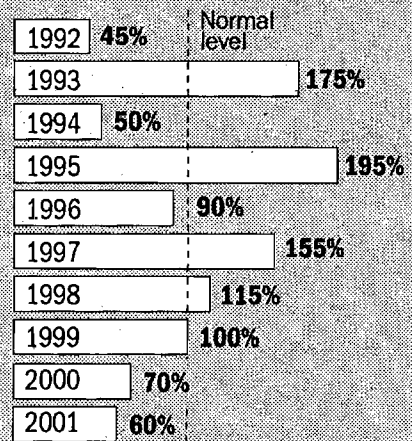
The MWD’s new 4,500-acre Diamond Valley Lake reservoir in Riverside County is capable of storing 800,000 acre-feet of water. It is already half-full.

MWD General Manager Ronald R. Gastelum said that, despite any supply cutbacks, the Los Angeles water agency “will provide its region with a reliable and dependable water supply through this year and the foreseeable future.”

At the height of the last drought, in the winter of 1991, the state cut off water to farmers and met only 30% of urban needs. If today’s conditions get no better, the 2001 cutbacks could be even more severe for urban users.

**Sierra Snowpack**

Statewide average snowpack as percentage of normal on Feb. 1, from 1992 through present:



Source: California Dept. of Water Resources

Los Angeles Times

what concerns us is the size of the cut in the first dry year.”

## More Restrictions on Shipping Water

In the last drought, drastic water cutbacks weren’t imposed until several years into it. Farming experts say what’s different now is that the increased population is using more water, and there are more restrictions on how much water can be shipped because of environmental and wildlife restoration efforts.

The other big source of water shipments in California is the federal Bureau of Reclamation, which

will exacerbate the state's energy crisis, experts say. Farmers receiving less water from the state and federal government will be forced to increase ground water pumping, draining already stressed energy supplies.

On Wednesday, the state Department of Water Resources announced it might have to curtail deliveries as much as 80% to its 29 agency customers. They range from Butte and Plumas counties in the north and the Central Valley through Santa Barbara and San Luis Obispo counties and the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California and to the desert in Palmdale and Antelope Valley.

Water from the State Water Project meets part of the needs of 20 million people and helps irrigate 600,000 acres of farmland.

The warning was more dire than an earlier estimate that deliveries might be cut 60%. On Friday, the state completed the second of five snow surveys in the Sierra, where much of the water in Southern California originates. The news was no better, said the Department of Water Resources' Jeff Cohen, after

for urban users.

"It's serious," said Ted Thomas, a spokesman for the Department of Water Resources. "On a historical basis, it ranks pretty high."

"If it comes true, it will be the lowest [allotment] urban contractors ever got," said John Coburn, a spokesman for the State Water Contractors, which represents 27 of the state's 29 main customers.

One of the state's largest agricultural customers is the Kern County Water Agency in Bakersfield, which supplies water to as much as 400,000 acres of farmland. An 80% cut would be "pretty drastic," said Don Marquez, a senior engineer for the agency.

But he said farmers also learned their lesson in the last drought and have invested heavily in ground water banking. At the moment, the district has 1 million acre-feet stored in the ground.

Increased ground water pumping has its own problems, primarily because it uses a lot of energy, and the state is expected to be short of power again this summer.

"We're still optimistic" that more rain will fall and deliveries will increase, Marquez said. "But

the Bureau of Reclamation, which operates the massive Central Valley Project, supplying irrigation water to 20,000 farms. That water supplier is also planning big cuts—65% to 80%—said Jeff McCracken, a spokesman for the bureau.

"This is a critically dry year right now," he said.

Also tightening the valve on federal water deliveries is a "whole slew of environmental obligations added in the last eight years," he said. To restore wildlife in the Sacramento Delta, there are severe restrictions on how much water can be taken from there.

The Metropolitan Water District of Southern California has a diversified supply of water sources from which to draw in times of shortage. It gets about a third of its water from the state, a third from the Colorado River and a third from a variety of other sources, including ground water basins, said MWD spokesman Muir.

Despite all the talk of cutbacks, state and federal water officials said there is no reason for alarm. "It's very early in the year," said Muir. "There are some very important water months ahead."